

The Medici Effect: Innovation at the Intersections

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Although there is no single “formula” for innovation, there are many things we can do to enhance the innovative process and the environment supporting innovation.

In his book, *The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts & Cultures* (HBR Press), Frans Johansson articulates one of the core enablers of breakthrough ideas – the intersection.

He describes the intersection as being the place that happens when two or more cultures, disciplines, mind-sets, or ways of viewing the world come together. It is in these intersections that new, high value ideas can emerge.

The name for this phenomenon came from the Medici’s – a wealthy and powerful fifteenth-century family of bankers who played a key, enabling role in the Italian Renaissance. The family’s wealth was used to support the confluence of scientists, artists, philosophers, and other creative individuals in an intense social crucible of creativity in Florence, Italy. The combined effect of this highly energized and intermixed environment was the emergence from the Dark Ages and an explosion of the sciences and arts that laid critical foundations for today’s world.

At the heart of the Medici Effect is connection. And specifically we mean the connection of two or more things from very different fields of thought with independent philosophies, approaches, mechanisms and ways of thinking about things.

We have all used the term “out of the box thinking”. The Medici Effect is a way we can achieve out of the box thinking – by exposing ourselves and our foundational assumptions to other people with very different views and tools so that we are both challenged and gifted with new insights. Once we know this effect occurs, we can purposely create environments and processes that take us out of our own worlds and comfort zones and let us gain from the very different views of others.

As you might expect, there are many barriers to doing this. It tends not to happen naturally. We surround ourselves with people like us, we learn processes and theories from our own fields, and we develop discipline to follow rules both visible and hidden. Soon we are mired in our own thinking traps, both socially and in our own minds.

Socially, it is easy to associate with people of like mind and harder to associate with people in different fields and disciplines. They don’t understand our language and our issues and frankly, we may simply not have opportunities to interact with others outside our field of work.

But Johansson argues that this is the very cause of our thinking within our box. And the solution involves purposely forcing ourselves to test our ideas against the views of people in completely different fields. This involves work and effort.

It means we have to take the effort to develop communication with others outside our field. We need to find ways to be understood and conversely to understand their ways of viewing things. At a social level, we need to purposely connect with others outside our fields of thought.

In our own minds, we have another problem. It is called the associative barrier.

The simplest way to see associative barriers in action is when we jump to a conclusion. We see item A and we jump to conclusion B. That is because we have always, in our view, associated A with B. We want to move liquid from here to there. Obviously we must use a pump. The concept “pump” is associated with the concept “move liquid”.

The way our brains are wired, we rapidly lose consciousness of associations once they are made. For example, most of us have experienced the somewhat frightening phenomenon of realizing we have been driving our car for the past fifteen minutes and were completely unconscious of the fact that we were driving, what we passed and where we were. We were busy rehearsing our presentation to an upcoming meeting or some other mental exercise while some other part of our brain was driving.

For the most part, this ability of our brains to automate our thinking associations is a good thing. We don't have to devote mental units to the basics – we can build on what we've learned in the past to work on higher level things.

But when it comes to innovation of new ideas, this can become a critical barrier. Our automatic associations, which we not only don't question, but we're not even aware of, can cause us to make assumptions that limit our creativity.

When you expose yourself and your ideas to others in completely different fields or with completely different ways of thinking, although uncomfortable, it can lead to critical insights. This is the Medici Effect in action. You can use this effect today.

Whether your innovation effort is big or small, you can benefit from involving yourself in conversations about your ideas with people from very different fields. Here's how:

Observe what happens as you try to explain your concepts – what assumptions are revealed and what off-the-wall ideas emerge. When they challenge you, become explorative, not defensive. Sensitize yourself to their responses and questions and indulge yourself in looking back into the assumptions you may have unconsciously made. You may find yourself – and your conversation partner – developing new ideas neither of you could have ever dreamed of by yourselves.

And this is at the heart of innovation...